

# Use of Social Media by Older Adults

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**Abstract:** The article presents issues regarding the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by older adults and senior citizens. Over 55 years old people who attend the Jagiellonian University of Third Age, took part in the survey conducted in 2019. The aim of the study was to find out if respondents use social network sites (SNS) and how they participate in specific activities on these websites in order to gratify their needs (questions focused most on the issues connected with privacy management and data security). The study was attended by 89 people (78 correctly completed survey sheets were analysed). The results show that respondents use the internet willingly and that they are also active in SNS. One of the main factors motivating them to do so is curiosity. They prefer Facebook, rarely use Instagram or Twitter. Through SNS, they contact both friends and family. Respondents are cautious about sharing private content and their skills are not sufficient to protect their privacy effectively. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of older adults' SNS use. The topic is relevant from a social (e.g. digital exclusion) and economic (e.g. older adults as consumers) point of view.

**Keywords:** social media, SNS, internet, older adults, seniors

## 1. Introduction

The internet and social media initially provoked a lot of enthusiasm. The widespread access to information and communication technologies (ICT) was considered as a remedy for many traditional social problems, e.g. social inequalities and divides, because the Internet allows access to information, knowledge and contacts in a simple and cheap way (Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Benkler, 2006; Shirky 2008). However, the practice of social life has shown that the use of new technologies is more complicated and specific skills and competences are necessary for effective use of ICT (Jasiewicz, Filiciak, Mierzecka et al. 2015). The new media environment that is changing rapidly, may widen the information gap between those who can and those who are unable to follow the development of technology (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Numan et al., 2001; Schradie, 2011; Cebula, 2014; Brake 2014).

Older adults (also called senior citizens here), as ICT users, are a specific group. The ICT technology appeared during their adult life. That is why older adults are called digital immigrants (Prensky 2001). To use modern possibilities of electronic communication, they had to get new skills, as well as change their habits regarding communication (digital literacy). Studies carried out in different countries show that active using of ICT can improve quality of life. Access to the internet gives older adults the opportunity to improve communication skills, develop their awareness, educational potential and commitment to self-development (Millar and Falk, 2000; Hong, Trimi and Kim, 2016; Seifert and Schelling, 2018; Räsänen and Koironen 2016).

Older Internet users are still a much smaller percentage of people using the Internet than other age groups. Although their number increases from year to year, and this increase is much more rapid than among younger users (Zickuhr and Madden, 2012; Szmigielska, Bąk and Hołda 2012). According to Eurostat (2019) research, only 55% of Poles over 55 years old use the internet. This value is much lower than the European average of 73%. However, only 48% of Polish users and 68% Europeans use the web at least once a week, which can be qualified as regular use. Older adults as an internally very diverse age group - both in terms of social activity (people still professionally active, retired and still active or completely passive) and psycho-physical - they are also a highly specific group of Internet users. As research shows, they use social networking, banking and online shopping much less often than others. They also publish their own content on the web less willingly than other users (Niemczyk 2016). This can be influenced by many different factors. As digital immigrants, older adults have different habits and media usage patterns.

Using ICT requires many e-skills, especially in the sphere of social media which highly interfering with the private sphere and affecting our virtual identity. E-competences are best characterized by so-called catalogue and relational approach (Buchholtz, Jasiewicz, Tarkowski et. al. 2015). In the catalogue approach, the emphasis is on

levelling out social inequalities, which results in treating digital competences as a set of rigid guidelines identical for all ICT users necessary for the proper use of these technologies depending on the needs. As a supplement to this understanding of digital competences, a relational approach is introduced. According to this e-competences are understood as a kind of dimension that facilitates functioning in other areas of life. It must take into account social diversity to make it easier for the individual to live in a relevant field (Ibid.). In relational terms, user motivation is the most important factor (Eurostat 2019).

Nowadays, most of our activity in the Internet environment is aimed at managing information. Also, the presence on social network sites such as Facebook, contrary to current opinion, is not only intended to maintain interpersonal relationships or entertainment. These websites largely allow us to play various social roles, create our image, and to manage information in terms of its acquisition or dissemination. In this context, the issue of privacy management is particularly important, because it determines our network security. The purpose of the article is to present the behaviour of older adults while using SNS, with particular emphasis on usage patterns and issues of data security and privacy management.

The authors focus in their research on Polish seniors. There has been an important level of digital exclusion in Poland for a relatively long time. In 2009, only 6% of people over the age of 60 used the internet (Batorski 2009). In 2018 this percentage increased and in the 65-74 age group was already about 28% (Susło, Paplicki, Drobnik 2019), however, it is still less than in other European Union countries (Ćwiek 2018). Digitally excluded people in Poland are primarily seniors living in rural areas. Among the most important reasons for not using the Internet, these people most often mention the lack of the need to use, but also often the lack of appropriate competences (Batorski 2009). Therefore, it can be considered that this group is still at the stage of learning modern technologies. They are still acquiring competences in this area.

The authors wanted to answer the following research questions:

- How do respondents assess their e-skills?
- What kind of SNS do they use and for what purposes?
- How their activity in SNS looks like?
- What type of content they share with other users and how they are managing private information?

The article presents the results of a study conducted among students of the University of the Third Age. The selection of group of people over 55 years old resulted from the specifics of the research sample. Because the study was limited to Third Age University students, the entire study group included people aged 55-84. Among them, the largest group were people aged 65-74. The results were analysed and compared with data from other sources. Despite the clear specifics of older adults, most social media research to date does not isolate this group or even focuses on young people. Hence the need to study the topic described in the article.

## **2. Older adults as internet and social media users**

Older adults as Internet users are different from other age groups because their presence on the Internet is not primarily based on the use of social media. According to the announcement from the Research Centre for Social Opinion Research published in 2018 only 39% Polish internet users aged 55-64 and 28% over 65 years old are registered on social networking sites. On the other hand, according to Research Centre of Public Opinion (CBOS Report 2018) respectively 16% and 9% made entries on them within one month after the query. Also, the Eurostat (2019) survey for 2019 shows that only 18% of Polish internet users over 55 and 29% in the Europe operate and create content on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Also, their level of activity in this area is significantly different from other generations, they are reluctant to publish photos and information about themselves, and their main intention is to control the information on an ongoing basis (Niemczyk 2016). The division within the age group considered to be senior causes differences in the way the Internet is used. Surveys conducted in different countries show that these differences still depend to a large extent on the education or income of the respondents (Räsänen and Koironen 2016). People up to the age of about 65 still professionally active have different needs than the older generation. Internet users from the first age group most often use the Internet for activities related to their profession, searching for information, communication with the family, making tourist reservations and facilitating everyday life by using banking or online shopping. People over 65 years old use health information portals most often. Internet serves

them primarily to improve their mental well-being, contact with the world, eliminate the feeling of loneliness, increase their self-esteem and sense of doing things (Mierzecka and Tarkowski 2015). Among the most popular services of the BC generation, the first place is taken by e-mail (used by more than 70% of Polish Internet users over 50 years old), which is also a basic tool of communication. Internet banking is also very popular. According to ZBP InfoSenior Report (2019), 94% of senior citizens with Internet access declared to use Internet banking, and 68% of them to do so at least once a week.

Analysing the presence of silver Internet users in the Social Media and their approach to the protection of privacy in the virtual space, it should be noted that the content published by senior citizens includes primarily basic data (name, surname, date and place of birth) and information related to their interests. A relatively small percentage of Internet users, i.e. 13% of people aged 55-64 and 12% over 65 years during the month of research published their photos or recorded films (CBOS 2018). Presented statistics show that a significant proportion of older adults show little activity in terms of creating their virtual identity and image building in SM. They do not tend to expand their knowledge of the tools offered by SNS or features that enable proper and safe creation of personal content to be shared. Only 4% of senior citizens create content published on SNS and websites in general. Moreover, as shown in the Eurostat survey for 2016, 4% of Polish internet users aged 55-74 also manage personal data by restricting access to their profiles on SNS (most likely by using privacy settings). For comparison, the overall percentage in European countries is 13%. As you can see their actions are passive in nature and are mainly limited to minimising the amount of personal information they publish. Therefore, arises the question whether passive use is a conscious choice of older Internet users, whether it results from a lack of need to be active, or whether it is conditioned by the existence of a competence barrier due to a lack of skills to actively post content online?

The conscious management of information published by older people, as well as the comments that appear on it, requires the ability to recognise negative content and to block and delete it. Older Internet users may find it difficult to notice potentially dangerous or offensive content incompatible with netiquette, as well as insufficient practical skills to fully control the range of information appearing in their user accounts. They decide what they will publish about themselves, less often have enough skills to block external content visible on their profiles, which also affect virtual image, and sometimes even change the overtone or intentional meaning of the information published by the user. The lack of statistical data showing how many e-seniors regularly moderate with comments on the content they published does not diminish the essence of the problem but create a new field of research.

### **3. Research on internet and SNS use by students of Jagiellonian University of Third Age**

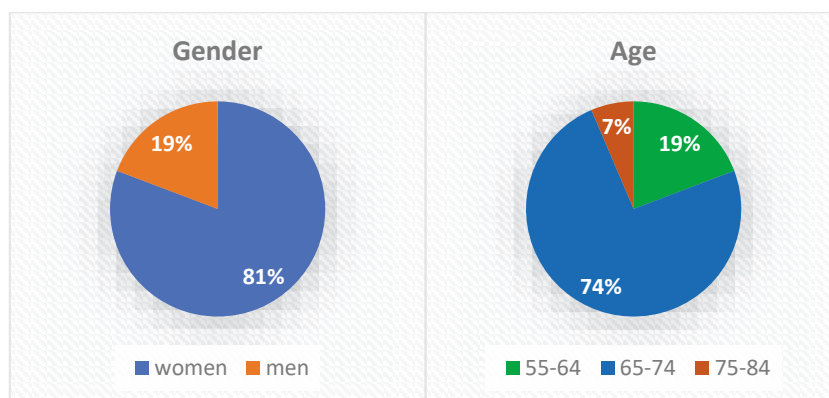
#### **3.1 Research methods**

The authors have done a research in the form of a survey conducted among students of the Jagiellonian University of the Third Age. The third age universities are an existing form of support for senior citizens in Poland. They have been operating at Polish universities since 1975. Their goal is to educate the elderly, their activation, integration and meeting their psychosocial needs (Kozieł and Trafiałek 2007). The Jagiellonian University of the Third Age was established in 1982 at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow -the oldest one in Poland. It has been promoting knowledge among older adults through lectures, seminars and workshops for almost 40 years.

The research was done in April and May 2019. The anonymous survey was conducted in paper form, which is easier for the selected research group. This form gives almost full return; direct contact with the interviewer improves the reliability of test results. The selection of the research sample was based on age, degree of social activity, and minimal ICT skills. Students of the University of the Third Age well met the sample selection requirements.

89 survey sheets were collected. However, 4 surveys were rejected due to incompleteness of relevant data, and 7 surveys of people not using the Internet were also rejected. Ultimately, the study was based on 78 survey sheets. 63 women and 15 men were among the respondents. This disproportion is characteristic for this age group and results from socio-demographic conditions and average life expectancy. Among the respondents were 15 people aged 55-64, 58 people aged 65-74, 5 people aged 75-84 (Fig.1). None of the respondents were over 84 years old. The vast majority of respondents (66 people) mentioned Cracow as their place of residence, i.e. a large city with a population of approx. 800 thousand. So, the selection of the research sample is not

representative for the examined age group. The whole sample is not big enough. In addition, the surveyed are active senior citizens, mostly women, usually with a high level of education, usually from a large city. Therefore, the study can only be treated as an exploratory research.



**Figure 1:** The share of respondents by gender and age

The survey had an introductory part (about: gender, age, place of residence) and 3 parts of closed or partially closed questions (allowing individual input of the respondents). The first part contained basic questions about how the respondents used the Internet. The next part contained specific questions examining Internet knowledge and skills. The third part concerned the use of SNS. The article uses data from the introductory part and data from the first and third parts.

### 3.2 Results

The starting point for considerations on the use of SNS by older adults is the general use of computer and the Internet by senior citizens as well as the skills of them in the ICT area. Therefore, the first part of the survey includes questions about the frequency of Internet use and self-assessment about ICT skills. The results are shown in the table 1. Data was also divided between men and women.

**Table 1:** The questions about the general use of computer and the Internet

	Total		Female		Male	
	No.	% of resp.	No.	% of resp.	No.	% of resp.
<b>How often do you use the Internet?</b>						
Daily	50	64%	40	63%	10	67%
A few times a week	21	27%	17	27%	4	27%
Once a week	4	5%	3	5%	1	7%
Once a month	3	4%	3	5%	0	0%
<b>How do you evaluate your ICT skills?</b>						
Basic	18	23%	13	21%	5	33%
Average	46	59%	37	59%	9	60%
Advanced	14	18%	13	21%	1	7%
Professional	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Almost nobody said that he acquired ICT and internet knowledge at the University of the Third Age (only 1% of respondents). They gained this knowledge usually with the help of family or friends (33% of respondents), at courses in their former work (35%) or alone (25%).

The second part of the survey concerned the use of SNS. The first question was about the services used. The most popular international services were proposed: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the popular Polish SNS 'Nasza Klasa' ('Our Class' - used to find contacts with former school mates). Respondents could choose multiple SNS, they could also indicate other off-list SNS. 42 people (33 women and 9 men) in the study group indicated at least one service. This is 54% of respondents (female - 52%, male - 60%). 9 people (5 women and 4 men) indicated 2 or more services, this is 12% of respondents (female - 8%, male - 27%). The number of indications, the percentage of all respondents and the percentage of users pointing to individual services are presented in the table 2. It is also worth noting that only 11 people using SNS did not indicate Facebook (indicating at least one other website). Among the 'other' answers, the repeated service was only WhatsApp (2 indications).

**Table 2:** The question about the SNS used

		Total			Female			Male	
Which SNS do you use?	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users
Facebook	31	40%	74%	24	38%	73%	7	47%	78%
Twitter	4	5%	10%	3	5%	9%	1	7%	11%
Instagram	1	1%	2%	1	2%	3%	0	0%	0%
Nasza Klasa	14	18%	33%	9	14%	27%	5	33%	56%
Other	5	6%	12%	3	5%	9%	2	13%	22%

Another question concerned the contacts maintained by SNS. The results are shown in the table 3. In addition, a question was asked about making new friends via SNS. Among SNS users, as many as 37 respondents (88% of SNS users) denied making new friends, only 2 people (5% of SNS users) confirmed this, 3 SNS users declined to reply.

**Table 3:** The question about the contacts maintained by SNS

		Total			Female			Male	
Who do you contact via SNS?	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users
With family	33	42%	79%	24	38%	73%	9	60%	100%
With friends	35	45%	83%	29	46%	88%	6	40%	67%
With colleagues and clients	1	1%	2%	1	2%	3%	0	0%	0%
I make new friends	1	1%	2%	1	2%	3%	0	0%	0%
Other	1	1%	2%	1	2%	3%	0	0%	0%

They were also asked about the motivation for using SNS. The survey contained a list of some common reasons for starting to use SNS. Respondents could also indicate a different reason outside the list. Most people chose 1 or 2 main reasons. The results are shown in the table 4. An interesting reason among 'other reasons' was "to know the opinions of others."

**Table 4:** The question about the motivation for using SNS

		Total			Female			Male	
Why have you started using SNS?	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users
To contact family	22	28%	52%	14	22%	42%	8	53%	89%
At the instigation of friends using SNS	10	13%	24%	9	14%	27%	1	7%	11%
Out of curiosity	14	18%	33%	11	17%	33%	3	20%	33%
To be able to contact people who share my passions and interests	7	9%	17%	5	8%	15%	2	13%	22%
Other reasons	3	4%	7%	3	5%	9%	0	0%	0%

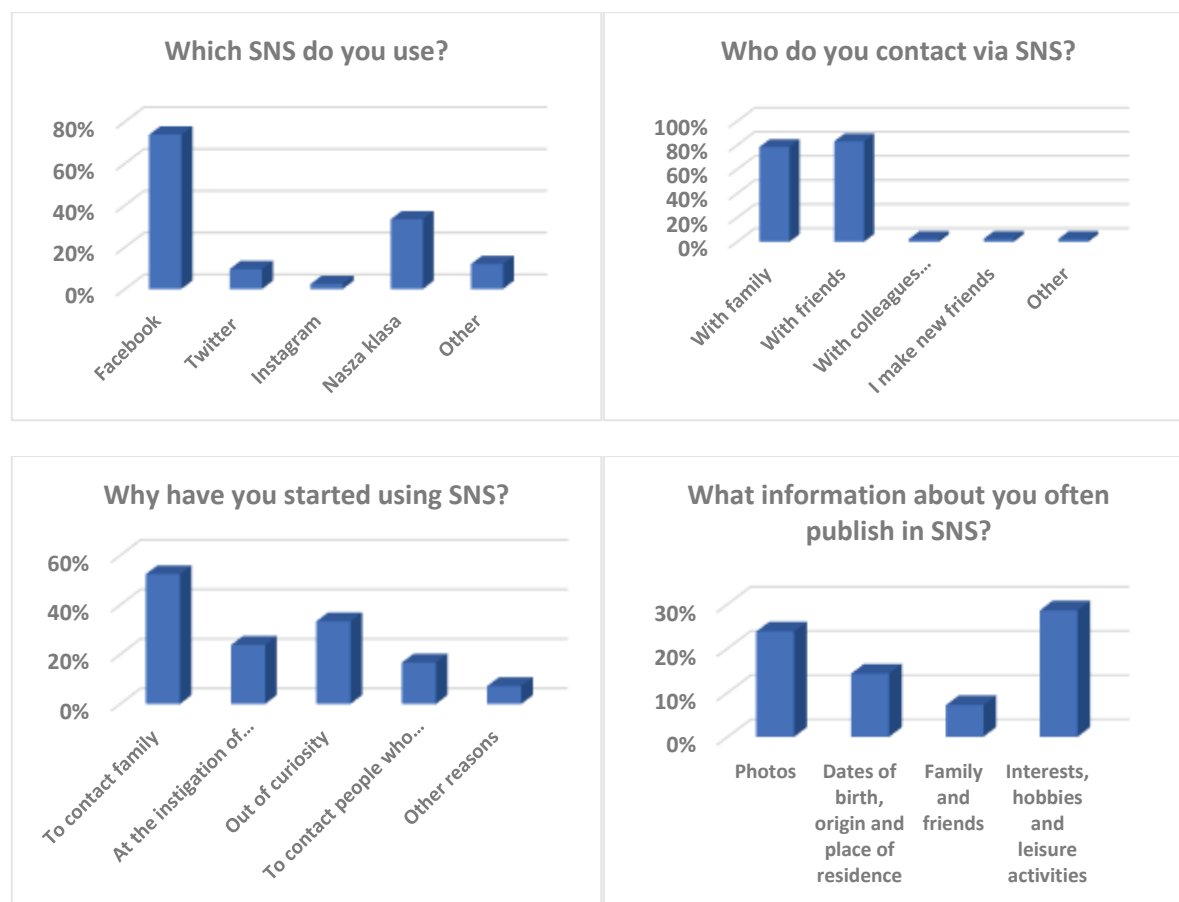
Two questions about SNS skills have been asked. They are also related to security and privacy issues. The first question is whether you know how to change your profile settings to private. There were 15 positive answers (36% of SNS users), 25 negative (60%) and 2 refusals (5%) among SNS users. Among the positive responses were 11 women (33% of SNS users) and 4 men (44%). The second question is whether you know how to delete unwanted posts and comments on your SNS accounts. 21 positive responses (50% of SNS users), 18 negative (43%) and 3 refusals (7%) were received among SNS users. Among the positive responses were 16 women (48% of SNS users) and 5 men (56%).

One question was about publishing private information on SNS "What information about yourself do you often publish on SNS?" A list was proposed: Photos; Information on dates of birth, origin and place of residence; Information about family and friends; Information on interests, hobbies and leisure activities. The results are shown in the table 5. Respondents could also indicate other off-list information published in SNS. Several respondents added that via SNS they also publish their nickname (probably in online games) and political information.

**Table 5:** The question about publishing private information on SNS

		Total			Female			Male	
What information about you often publish in SNS?	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users	No.	% of resp.	% of SNS users
Photos	10	13%	24%	7	11%	21%	2	13%	22%
Information on dates of birth, origin and place of residence	6	8%	14%	2	3%	6%	4	27%	44%
Information about family and friends	3	4%	7%	1	2%	3%	2	13%	22%
Information on interests, hobbies and leisure activities	12	15%	29%	11	17%	33%	1	7%	11%

Data from the above questions are also presented in the charts (Fig.2)



**Figure 2:** The share of answers (percentage of SNS users) to individual questions

#### 4. Discussion

Once again, the authors emphasize that the study group is not representative for all older adults. The surveyed seniors usually live in a large city. There are no significantly older people among them. They are usually well educated and self-motivated to continuous study and interested in learning new things. It also affects the willingness to use new ICT and SNS opportunities. Therefore, it is difficult to clearly assess to what extent the Polish specificity can affect the results of the study in this group.

Another problem is that the sample is heavily biased towards woman, because a gender ratio is approx. 4:1. Although this disproportion between the number of women and men is characteristic for students of the third age universities in Poland, the ratio is not reliable for all older adults. So, the detected differences between men and women should be treated carefully. Nevertheless, the survey allows achieving the objectives of the exploratory article and can be a starting point for further research.



The first part of the survey indicates that the surveyed senior citizens use the internet very actively. The vast majority use it every day (both men and women). The surveyed older adults usually have no problems with computer and internet, as the vast majority of respondents assess their ICT skills as at least average (both men and women). Although it should be noted that there was no one who describes their skills as a professional. No significant differences can be found between women and men in the use of the internet and ICT.

Most of the respondents used at least one SNS. The most popular is significantly Facebook (40% of all respondents, 74% of SNS users), which is also typical for other age groups and typical for most of the world. However, the popularity of the next SNS 'Nasza Klasa' is interesting. It is an exclusively Polish service with high specialization and limited functionality, because it is used practically only to communicate with former school mates. This shows the need to maintain and renew contacts from many years ago and to take advantage of modern opportunities. However, half of the users of 'Nasza Klasa' used also at least one other service. Other SNS (Twitter, Instagram) got significantly fewer indications and were used almost exclusively at the same time with other SNS. The surveyed men much more often than women used more than one website, hence the number of service choices among men is higher.

Senior citizens maintain contact via SNS with two almost equal groups: friends and family. Colleagues and clients are an insignificant group of contacts among the surveyed retirees, it goes without saying. In general, the need to keep in touch with others is undoubtedly the main reason for using SNS. Therefore, the fact that the SNS was previously used by family and friends is the motivation to set up an account in the service. Among the respondents the greater part of men than women use SNS to contacts with the family and therefore started to use SNS. It is interesting that a lot of senior citizens (24% of SNS users) indicated curiosity as the main motivation. This means that many senior citizens are not afraid of new technologies, which contradicts the common stereotype. On the other hand, it is also interesting that senior citizens almost do not use the SNS to make new friends. This may be associated with some concerns and caution when using SNS.

Another research shows that the use of social media can have a positive impact on older adults. Thanks to SNS, they can receive social support in a difficult life situation, regardless of geographical location. It has been shown that further positive consequences include overcoming loneliness, relieving stress and raising a sense of control and self-esteem. Possible negative consequences may include the misuse of personal data, as well as the distribution and uncritical acceptance of potentially harmful information via online communities. (Leist 2013).

However, answers to the questions about SNS skills in our survey can be a source of concern. In general, a large proportion of older adults have problems setting up the account, especially privacy settings. Despite the average (at least) ICT skills, according to the declarations of most respondents, more than half of SNS users in older age does not have the ability to use a basic tool for the protection of private information. The number of answers is too small to identify differences between men and women in this aspect.

On the other hand, our study shows a reluctance to publish private information, in particular on dates of birth, origin and place of residence as well as about family and friends. However, the number of responses to a question about published private data is much lower than for the other questions. This may be due to a lack of need to share their daily lives with other Internet users. Another reason may be the fear of using published information in a way that threatens security, e.g. by identity theft. There is a significant percentage disproportion between male and female behaviour. Women share personal and other private information (information on dates of birth, origin and place of residence and information about family and friends) less often than men. On the other hand, women more often share information on interests, hobbies and leisure activities. However, these conclusions are based on a very small response sample. Generally, older adults do not publish many photos. We can conclude that older people care about protecting their data, but their activities are limited mainly to minimize the information posted on the network, not the use of their account settings.

## **5. Conclusions**

Older adults often have less opportunities to maintain personal contacts with other people (no professional contacts, mobility restrictions), but online communication can partially solve the problem of keeping in touch. The number of older people using the Internet and SNS is growing dynamically. Our study confirms the results of other studies that SNS helps older users primarily as a communication tool. This is the most important Internet

function for them. However, it is replacing or supplementing traditional forms of communication with family and friends, rather than communicating with people met on the network.

Using new advanced services requires new e-skills. Therefore, it may be difficult for senior citizens to learn new technologies and understand new online threats. However, the survey indicates that the respondent's senior citizens acquired basic ICT skills. The surveyed seniors want to explore new ICT and SNS opportunities, and curiosity is an important motivation. They also notice new threats on the Internet and consequently see the need to protect their private data. However, they often do not have enough skills to protect this data. This probably results in their high caution in publishing private information as well as low activity in creating their virtual image.

The above-mentioned reasons indicate the need to help senior citizens to acquire and improve e-skills. On the one hand, it is necessary from a social point of view to counteract the digital exclusion of a significant part of society. On the other hand, an increasing part of the economy is moving to the internet. SNS are also usually commercial ventures earning from advertising and profiling users. Social media can be used in public relations and marketing (notably word-of-mouth marketing), it is possible to engage customers in developing new products (Polańska 2014). Older adults are a specific group because they often have significantly more financial resources than young people. They are an attractive group of users from a business point of view. Hence, competences, the ability to maintain security and high activity of senior citizens on the Internet and SNS are important for the entire economy.

The exploratory studies presented in the article are a base for conducting further research using a larger and more diverse sample, as well as seeking the causes of the described phenomena. Broader research would confirm some of these, including in particular the differences between women and men. Instead, qualitative research would allow a better understanding of the motivation for using SNS by senior citizens. Further research should lead to the development of new proposals to improve the situation of older adults in virtual reality of the Internet, including SNS services.

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